

Third Sunday after Pentecost—Year C
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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I remember sitting in a class in college and listening to a classmate say, “I just can’t imagine what that’s like.” My classmate was referring to the readings that we’d been assigned. The class that week dealt with the lives of base Christian communities living and resisting corrupt and dangerous regimes in Central America in the 70s and 80s, and the readings were graphic and heartbreaking. We were trying to comprehend the stories of Central American Christians with no money, no political power—people living right on the dangerous margins. We read about priests who were murdered for resisting drug lords and paramilitary guerrilla generals using farmlands as drug highways. We read about shootings and worse for women and children. And in story after story, these Christians were brutalized by powerful people or governments who treated them as objects or barriers or slaves. And my classmate said, “I just can’t imagine what that’s like.”

I’m sure we’ve all said something along those lines at one time or another. I don’t want to imagine those brutalities, and I sometimes wonder if someone like me even can. The reason this particular vignette sticks in my memory is because that sentence seemed to make my professor mad. She turned to the class and said, “Don’t tell me you can’t imagine what that’s like; you HAVE to imagine what that’s like.” She went on to explain that for us to have compassion, for us to empathize with the plight of those in the most vulnerable places in society, we have to use our God-given gift of imagination to try and feel the pain, the destitution, the fear. And when we use that imagination, our reaction to the evil will be a brave and full-throated rejection. We can preach against the horror when we allow ourselves to imagine the horror. We can fight the horror when we allow ourselves to imagine the horror. It was a good lesson, one I need to learn over and over again.

I still get lots of updates on Facebook or Twitter from friends I knew well in Chicago—lots of pastor and social-worker types. Several of my friends noted that the incidence of gun violence in Chicago over the Memorial Day weekend was especially gruesome this year. We arrive at the end of May and can expect the hot days to come up, the days to lengthen and gun violence to escalate in the poorest communities in cities all over America. We Americans have more wealth than any society in the history of the world, and we have more armies than any society in the history of the world, and yet, we have found a way to construct a city where if you are poor or Black or brown, you have a significantly higher chance of being shot dead than if you are white or well-to-do. Lord have mercy, how did we design a world like this? Where do we go for help?

Jesus arrives at the city of Nain in this morning’s Gospel story. It’s not clear why he and the disciples have decided to go to Nain, but when he arrives, he finds himself in the midst of a funeral procession. The day before, a widow’s son died, and the townspeople were carrying his body through the center of Nain on a funeral bier before he was to be buried.

“When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother.”

This past Wednesday, our Bishop, the Rt. Reverend Steven Miller, asked the clergy of this Diocese to wear orange as a way to raise awareness about the plague of gun violence in our city. I claim no expertise about gun policy or the best ways to legislatively address this epidemic of violence in our cities. I do, though, know a lot about stories. And I was in the middle of reading about this widow, newly bereaved, marching her dead son through the center of Nain, when the Bishop’s request came in. And I had to wonder how many times that story is being repeated here in the city of Milwaukee week after week this summer. When you see the ambulance late at night, do you wonder if someone has died? How many times does a woman in our city cry over the body of a son or a husband who has found himself in the crossfire. Can we imagine the grief of those mothers? Must we imagine the grief of those mothers?

The Gospel story today says that Jesus had compassion for the widow in the city of Nain. He went up to her and told her not to weep. What are we, followers of Jesus, doing for the widows of Milwaukee? Are we using our best imagination? Are we unleashing our compassion? I know that we aren’t Jesus. I know that we don’t have the power to walk up to a casket and tell the young man to breathe, to live again.

We’re not Jesus, but we’re not chopped liver either. They don’t call us the Body of Christ for nothing. It is our imagination that will lead us to compassion for the brutalized, the forsaken. It is our arms that will offer solace in the city that needs it. It is our hands that will wipe away the tears of the mothers and fathers who mourn. And it is our voices that will speak up for the change we need to see in the world. And, in these days after Pentecost, it is the Holy Spirit who will guide us to work for change in our city.

There are a million ways that the church is reminded of God’s love. We have the beloved community of St. Mark’s—supporting each other, nurturing one another. We are blessed with the Lord’s Supper and with the waters of Baptism—both lavish expressions of God’s love for us. Given the sure knowledge of God’s love, how, I wonder, are we going to respond? What are we going to do so that there is a different story next summer—one with fewer widows, fewer sons lying dead in the middle of town. My prayer is that we can imagine what that’s like. Amen.